Title: "The Anthropocentric Gaze: Animal Figures in Select Works of Children's Literature and Animation Films"

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Synopsis

A mainstreaming of prioritizing ecological concerns while studying certain texts certainly includes weighing upon the presentation of non-human animal figures in the same. Portrayals of non-human animals in literature(even in its most primal forms as in cave-paintings or in hieroglyphs) is no rare phenomenon. But studying the same presentations of non-human portrayals with an ecocritical concern has still not been the much-beaten path. The proposed thesis attempts to study this very angle in portrayals of non-human animals, with a special focus on certain selected texts.

The core idea in this concept of 'anthropocentrism', or an 'anthropocentric' perception is that of an inherent belief system of considering human beings as the supreme species on the planet over other non-human existences and thus entitled to any needs, utilities or privileges over them. Certainly, this human -chauvinistic belief system is not a novice entry. Intricate relationship between human beings and non-human beings has always been there from the very beginning of human existence itself, and as time has progressed the 'human—non-human ' binary has found its dimensions drawn in stronger lines. If we turn to philosophical or religious edicts, there also we find a confusing reflection of this relation. Almost in all the religions we find an ample display of non-human animal figures while narrating their mythologies or edicts , and yet the attitude most religions display towards the non-humans has a very confusing tinge to it. For example if in Christianity we find the 'dove' or the 'lamb' symbolizing the divine, and yet the idea of 'dominium terrae ' in The Bible explicitly expresses this very concept of 'human-exceptionalism' in announcing human-beings to be the authorized entity to 'replenish the earth ' and 'subdue' it and to have 'dominion' over the ' fish of the sea' , the 'fowl of the air' and 'over

every living thing that moveth upon the earth' (Genesis 1, 28), and the interpretation of 'enjoying dominion' as 'stewardship' cannot completely counter the human-centric bias reflecting within. If we look into Hinduism it has also a gallery of non-human animals playing important roles in the mythology and yet animal-sacrifices is quite an old and ongoing ritual. Philosophers have also variously commented upon this issue of the status of non-human beings in the world.If the likes of Pythagoras or Empedocles were against slaughtering animals or Kant opposed cruelty towards the non-humans, there reigned a sense of hierarchy all the way where of course humans were placed much above the non-humans. And the sense of hierarchy only confirms how 'anthropocentrism' works, even under the garb of compassion towards the non-human 'others'.

Non-human animal figures also find to be utterly relied upon in many literary texts or in other media such as animation series or films, and these portrayals certainly yield an interesting study in measuring out the effect of this certain confidence in human-hierarchy in the making and presentation of those characters. The texts which have juveniles, children and young adults as target readers or audience come first under the radar as children's literature has a greater tendency to rely upon non-human characters in their narratives with purposes differing variously as well. At times the non- human figures come to add to the attraction value for juveniles or at times we find anthropomorphized animals acting as symbolic being in fables loaded with certain moral suggestions. Adventure stories for young adults also portray animal figures where we find them presented not totally free of an anthropocentric narration. And when these texts are catered to children it opens up chances of young minds getting manipulated to acquire and adapt to this certain anthropocentric perception and a likewise attitude towards our non-human counterparts. And inculcating an anthropocentric gaze is not desirable or healthy for the larger fabric of attempts to create an ecological concern among all. The thesis has thus attempted to unravel the details of how time and again human-centrism and anthropocentric bias, in aggressive or moderate terms, has found space in literature meant for or catered to children.

The research work has selected certain works as base-texts to proceed with the thesis. The texts which have been selected belong to different genres ,targeting different aged children, and mostly works which are still now not critically well studied. And if The selected works contain works where anthropocentric traits are direct and casually embedded in an unapologetic way, then, to achieve a balanced study, it also takes into consideration works which attempt at

countering the human-chauvinistic ways and tries catering their narratives to fit in more of a compassionate gaze for non-human entities. If the study on animal figures in nursery rhymes or in the picture books by Syd Hoff attempts measuring the anthropocentric effects in juvenile literature, then the study of selected works of Dhan Gopal Mukerji like Kari the Elephant , or Hari the Jungle Lad or The Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling , which, in a generalised way ofcourse, falls into the category of animal-adventure stories which have primarily young adult children as readers. Reading Mukerji and Kipling parallelly interestingly yield a double nature of sentiments involving colonial dynamics, a primary one with the human—non-human binary, whereas the other layered one with references to the European colonization in the Indian subcontinent. Henry Williamson's Tarka the Otter, or George Rooper's A Fox's Tale or other animal autobiographies helps us to have a view through the naturalist's looking glass and how their narratives accommodate the non-humans. Whereas Anna Sewell's Black Beauty or Margaret Marshall Saunder's Beautiful Joe which are considered as milestones in the evolving path of fighting for the rights of animals, offer to study the nature of portrayal by the advocates of animal-rights, and the limitations of their representations as well. The special references to animation films with non-human animals in lead portrayals createan opportunity for the work to focus on a very current, relevant and popular media, and how much things have differed or not from anthropocentrically biased mainstream literature.

The thesis so far has been worked upon with thematic analysis as one of the primary ways. A thorough reading of the selected works with special attention on the non-human character's making, portrayal, purpose or function in the work and /or ending with special focus on the author or the narratorial voice's attitude as reflected in relation to the same characters help to chalk out a fabric of the anthropocentric designs existing in these texts. Whereas certain relevant critical and theoretical literature have been relied upon to provide with the basic structure of the analysis and argument to proceed with.

To talk in a capsule about the purpose or expectations over this particular thesis work it must be mentioned that nitpicking into certain literary texts and bashing them with a rigid theoretical framework to follow is certainly not one. Rather, to discuss in depth about the different layers of what the idea of anthropocentrism radiates and where such biases in literature and especially so in children's literature do exist, so that it can contribute to the cause of creating awareness about

larger ecological concerns in respect to the ill-treatment or biased attitude often meted out towards non-human animals, provided justification by this same belief-system of human-supremacy. The purpose is to study texts with cautiousness, and cater them to children with more cautiousness so that we don't end up preaching anthropocentric sentiments seeded within some apparently innocent text. The purpose is also to evolve this cautiousness where we can cater bias-free texts for the juveniles and train the young-adults to question and think over with an open-mind about the texts they read. Children and non-human animals, both lies somewhat in a comparatively vulnerable strata in the hierarchy of our world led by adult human beings, and if our purpose towards building an ecologically sustainable social system is to succeed then we need to be careful about our attitude towards both of these 'human' and 'non-human' communities, and to teach our children young not about 'human-chauvinism' rather the importance and rights of other non-human species as well.

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